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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the major points raised at a conference on "School/Community Collaborations: Policy Implications for Urban Education" held in New York City (New York) on May 12-13, 1988. Schools or school districts have successfully collaborated with businesses, unions, schools of higher education, hospitals, youth agencies, community organizations, and local governments to solve mutual problems. Collaborative goals may be categorized as either school improvement goals, such as decreasing the dropout rate, or fundamental change goals, such as obtaining a greater voice for the minority poor served by the schools. Participation in collaboratives may be described as either open, small group, or ritualized. Aspects of successful collaborations include the following: (1) commitment; (2) clarity about roles; (3) training; (4) incentives for institutionalization; and (5) evaluation. Since collaboratives can provide powerful support for many types of intervention, it is ultimately up to educators to decide which interventions are most effective, and then to create appropriate collaboratives to implement them. However, independent public school improvement is needed to sustain the interest and support of the participating community groups. (FMW)

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URBAN SCHOOL/COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS: MAKING THEM WORK WELL

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Urban School/Community Collaborations: Making Them Work Well

A conference on **School/Community Collaborations: Policy Implications for Urban Education** was held in New York City on May 12-13, 1988, sponsored by the Academy for Education Development (AED), the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education (ERIC/CUE), and The Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands. In preparation for it, several meetings were held to conceptualize the issues, identify the relevant theoretical perspectives, and develop the fundamental themes in school/community collaborations. The participants in these meetings were the following: Michele Cahill,* Norm Fruchter,* Patrick Montesano, and Sandy Weinbaum, of AED; Erwin Flaxman and Anane Olatunji, of ERIC/CUE; Peter Kleinbard,* of Young Adult Learning Academy; and Luis Reyes,* of ASPIRA of New York. The conceptual framework for examining school/community collaborations was presented at the opening panel of the conference. Below is a summary of the major points, both experiential and research based, raised during the conference.

*Panelist at the opening session of the conference.

Over the last eight years, collaborations between schools or school districts and businesses, unions, schools of higher education, hospitals, youth-serving agencies, community organizations, and local government have grown more common.

Schools, finding the educational, economic, and social problems of youth beyond their ability to solve alone, have sought these collaborations. At the same time, the difficulty of finding adequately prepared entry-level workers has prompted businesses and unions to seek involvement in the schools; further, there are public relations benefits from being associated with public education. Colleges and universities, particularly municipal institutions for whom the public schools supply a large proportion of incoming students, have also found greater involvement to be in their best interest: not only do they hope to increase the academic level of prospective freshmen, but a close tie to the schools can generate additional applicants and improve civic relations. Finally, community institutions that deliver health and social services to urban youth have found that schools are where the essential users can regularly be found. In fact, as collaboratives have already made clear, it is impossible to institute a community health, or other program without the cooperation of the local government, hospital, school, and neighborhood.

Setting Goals for Collaboratives

Collaboratives can start out with varied *school improvement* goals: decreasing the dropout rate, achieving better attendance, or improving achievement scores—through better health care, stronger links to business, and closer ties with higher education. Others may strive for more *fundamental change*, both in the school and the community at large: increased professionalism for teachers, more respect for students, a greater voice for the minority poor served by the schools.

Collaboratives have been relatively successful in creating such incremental changes as improvements in the school's physical facilities or the addition of new programs. Most collaboratives concentrate on adding services at the periphery: better early intervention, more

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counselors or after-school programs, improved health services, and stronger school-work linkages. Some also provide incentives and rewards to teachers, which improve morale. In fact, collaboratives, like most change strategies, tend to help those people or schools in the best position to profit by them.

Effecting change in the structure or content of the curriculum, where education takes place, is far more difficult. In a few cases, leverage from the outside has brought change that would not otherwise have occurred (the attachment of funding to changes in staff contracts, for example); and more could clearly be done with such leverage. However, most veterans of school/corporate collaboratives are deservedly cautious about the potential for these collaboratives to revitalize urban schools in any fundamental way. Perhaps one of the most powerful effects of community collaborations thus far has been the support generated for schools from state and federal legislatures and the policy community.

Types of Collaboratives

Experience suggests that collaboratives tend to evolve into several types. While some throw open wide nets to participation, others rely on the activism of a few groups or individuals who may well have been working on their own all along, and still others are largely ritualized collaborations. Although school systems can drive quite effective collaborations when there are other active members, collaboratives dominated by school systems, which are regulation-driven, tend to generate activities that are more symbolic than useful. While collectively driven collaborations that bring in a wide range of participants may be slow moving, they are generally conscientious and allow for some restructuring of the school system.

Aspects of Successful Collaboratives

Commitment. The most effective collaboratives begin with commitments at the highest levels: school superintendents, CEOs, and other institutional heads. Next, work must be done to ensure "ownership" inside the participating institutions among those who are expected to run the collaborative on a day-to-day level. For example, some collaboratives have been started as a result of such external orders as mandates to desegregate. While this ensures the involvement of superintendents and city officials, it can also turn school staff into unwilling participants whose commitment to accomplishment is small.

Clarity about goals. The most successful collaboratives begin with a clear set of goals for each participant. When schools (or other institutions) are merely passive recipients of external help, change is unlikely. The Boston Compact, for example, made explicit that Boston businesses were to provide a specific number of summer jobs as well as jobs for high school graduates, and that the public schools were to decrease the dropout rate, raise the level of daily attendance, and increase student achievement—again, all by clear amounts. Although the Boston business community has held to its side of the compact more successfully than have the schools, the very fact that this is known is an indication of how clearly both sides of the partnership declared their goals, and is in itself an accomplishment. Unfortunately, not all collaboratives achieve such clarity.

Clarity about roles. When professionals from different worlds are brought together, they often find it as difficult to share decision-making as to allocate responsibility or to value each others' expertise; misunderstandings and confusions can easily arise. For example, one school that was beginning to jointly plan a health clinic with a medical team from a nearby hospital wanted to contribute to the content of the confidentiality forms. The physicians in the collaborative were initially shocked; they had never had to share what they considered a medical prerogative. In other instances, a school's commitment to keep all student records confidential may make other collaborative members feel their access to students, parents, and student records limited, thus compromising their full participation.

A first step in both sharing responsibilities and preventing difficulties of turf is establishing clearly defined roles from the outset. Because responsibilities and roles also evolve as new tasks emerge, it is important to move slowly. Time must be allocated for regular discussions and clarifications. All concerned must be continually aware that they are working to create understanding among representatives of different cultures.

Training. Participants in any collaborative need training to work well with each other. This includes help with structured interaction, systematic problem solving, and planning. Since one result of a school/community collaborative is change, successful collaboratives frequently generate conflicts. Thus, training needs to prepare collaborative members both to deal with this conflict and to move nonrelevant problems to the side so the focus can remain on shared goals. When parents and other community members participate in collaboratives, training may also need to

include help wtih articulation and empowerment. Although most collaboratives pay lip service to the need for training with one- or two-day workshops, the fact is that professional training for any serious venture takes much longer. Money and time must be allocated for training in collaboration.

Incentives for institutionalization. Although many collaboratives are initially supported by foundation or corporate funds, one of the first tasks of any collaborative should be to ensure self-sufficiency, by finding permanent support, and ensuring long-term interest by participants. While businesses and colleges—as institutions—can derive public relations benefits and civic rewards from being involved in schooling, individual corporate executives, college administrators, and professors need incentives (beyond personal satisfaction) to remain interested over a long period. In the case of higher education, the internal structure of promotions and other rewards currently go against becoming involved with public schools. If, however, state aid to colleges and universities were linked to working with the public schools, the incentive and sanction structure within these institutions might change.

Evaluation. Much that happens in collaboratives is idiosyncratic: an abandoned factory is suddenly available for a vocational school, or a gift is targeted to start a program in banking. Moreover, decisions made each day depend on compromises that arise out of power shifts and differences in personality. Thus, evaluations of collaboratives are at best well-documented analyses of particular, and nonrepeatable processes. Yet, it is important to document these processes and to allow collaborative members to evaluate regularly where they stand in relation to their goals and to be encouraged by interim successes.

The Power of School-Community Collaboratives

One argument for school/business collaboratives has been that in poor urban areas no one has represented the public schools in fighting against dwindling school budgets. Thus it has been in the best interests of public educators to ally themselves with business, higher education, civic agencies, and other groups that could take on the cause of the schools. However, public education has also needed to show school improvement to sustain the support of these groups. Some collaborative members worry that, when this improvement does not occur, business and other civic organizations may lose interest.

But some observers also question the power of collaboratives to improve the schools significantly. Can they be expected to have even as much power as, say, an intensive new curriculum or a significant decrease in class size? Since collaboratives could, and do, provide support for many types of intervention, it is ultimately up to educators to decide which interventions are most effective, and then to enlist collaboratives to act in helpful ways. After all, it is still school professionals who know best how to educate children. Moreover, when schools do show positive change, they will continue to get the support they need from the larger community.

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